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# Interdisciplinary: Feminist Teaching, Research and Activism

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## **Interdisciplinary Knowledge: Feminist Teaching, Research, and Activism**

Feminists' interdisciplinary work is a critical response to claims that disciplinary expertise provides real knowledge. Interdisciplinary teaching, research, and activism emerge in opposition to claims that only certain kinds of ideas are valuable. This paper will briefly delineate those concepts that have created an intellectual tradition that does not recognize the political and strategic elements entailed by all knowledge formation. Feminist activism is a reaction to the narrowly defined boundaries of what counts as a good idea. The distinction between passive and active knowledge acquisition allows us to view feminist teaching, research, and activism as active, ongoing engagements that emerge from directed and investigative processes. And, as we shall see, the significance of this generative view of ideas lies in an engaged, collaborative effort. On the other hand, the significance of knowledge as something buried and awaiting discovery lies only in the passive observation of a limited self.

### **I**

The Divine Command Theory defines all knowledge as being received from God. One waits to be touched by God, God touches them, and knowledge is granted and reveals itself. Revealed knowledge is passively received, and this passive acquisition of knowledge justifies the belief that Truth is outside the individual. On the other hand, knowledge acquisition becomes a more engaging affair when individual people can claim to have “discovered” things in nature by themselves. Moreover, when ideas are conceived and created by the individuals themselves rather than passively received or simply observed, knowledge acquisition moves beyond engaging and into a revolutionary practice known as creative or integrated knowledge. This form of knowledge was not

only revolutionary; it also constituted a cognitive (albeit blasphemous) paradigm shift from God as the Prime Mover, the initiator of all things, to Man. With this shift, knowledge acquisition became an active and purposive process. And it was only after this shift that we were able to conceive an interdisciplinary form of knowledge that entailed the active integration of ideas created by many individuals.

Yet even though this process of knowledge acquisition entailed the active integration of ideas, knowledge was still narrowly defined by discipline and accessed only by a few. As far back as ancient Greek civilization, around 300 BCE, experts played vital roles in Plato's ideal society. In fact, the division of labor in Plato's *Republic*, and indeed the very legitimacy of society, rested on the proficiency of three specialized classes of men: the philosopher kings (the intellectuals); the soldiers (the protectorate); and the craftsmen (the artistically irrational). And at the turn of the 20th century, a broad range of integrated knowledge in medicine was removed from the hands of female medical practitioners and midwives, as well as from local and familial locations, and was instead put into the hands of male medical doctors and hospital complexes.

Specialization was not unique to these time periods; man's interest and inclination to silo knowledge extends to today, the Communication Age. The increased focus on disciplinary expertise and specialization drives a heightened level of impatience and frustration when an expert cannot be found. However, if we look back to the first and second waves of feminism, we will see that the emergence of interdisciplinary feminist teaching, research, and activism both corresponds with the rise of disciplinary specialization and stands in contrast to it.

## II

In order to gain a sense of the history involved in this intellectual evolution, it is helpful to refer back to a time when science had not yet emerged as a discipline. For example, during the early part of the 18th century, even as a natural philosopher, John Locke ground glass for eyewear and practiced medicine (although medicine was not then understood in the same scientific sense that it is today). And although it may be surprising to us now, Sir Isaac Newton, in spite of his 1687 treatise, *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy*, was not considered a scientist. There was no separate discipline of science. The ideas of these men, as well as the knowledge of philosophers in general, resulted from the integration of information from a variety of sources; knowledge was not received as a unified corpus. Yet philosophy was generally considered a specialization, albeit one often passively received by leisured individuals who considered themselves, or were considered by others, to be special. For example, during the Renaissance, both Da Vinci (in the late 1400s and early 1500s) and Galileo (in the late 1500s) viewed the content and acquisition of knowledge as a specialization. The content of knowledge was only available to those few who were deemed worthy by divination, stoic study, observation, and, above all, leisure. Knowledge only revealed itself to those believed by the clergy to be keenly sensitive to the linearity and hierarchy of thought sanctioned by the church. Truths were not science, but they were special, and were therefore available to those with specialized skills. Revelation, as well as simple observation, requires specialized faculties.

The acceptance of an individual's claim of knowledge was dependent on their specialized faculties, as well as whether the revelation or discovery was made at the right time in history and whether the special individual had powerful friends within the church.

Giordano Bruno's historical timing failed, and in the year 1600 he was burned at the stake in Florence for suggesting that the earth was not the center of the universe, while years before, Copernicus walked away with his life intact after revealing his astronomical discoveries because he had friends within the church, and he died of natural causes. Copernicus could "discover" truths, as long as he did not deny or refute revelation.

However, the acceptance of a knowledge claim as discovered knowledge required an enormous intellectual shift away from a view of knowledge as divinely received. Moreover, unlike passively received knowledge, Galileo's discovered knowledge would have resulted in him being burned at the stake, regardless of his papal connections, if he had admitted that the intellectual work he did was drawn from a coordinated effort to integrate discovered knowledge sources. He is thought to have admitted as much, but was forced to recant and placed under house arrest for the rest of his life.

Not until John Dewey, an American Pragmatist philosopher, promulgated a generative view of knowledge in the 1920s, did knowledge become thought of as an active and ongoing process. Even then, people found it difficult to accept the radical idea that knowledge was not a self-contained body waiting to be uncovered. Fifty years later, in the 1960s and 1970s, Michel Foucault, French philosopher and feminist of the Second Wave, made headway in changing how people think about knowledge formation, from a fixed content to a context-dependent process.

Even during the relatively modern period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, knowledge emerged as the specialized product of the industrial revolution's emphasis on humans and what they produced as "precision machines." "Taylorism," the American theory of labor specialization articulated at the beginning of the 20th century,

reinforced the proliferation of experts who were sustained by the knowledge principles of efficiency and profit. Business models were streamlined, and boilerplate legal forms were developed and installed as examples of useful and objective knowledge.

During this time, John Dewey's notion of generative knowledge as knowledge that was created rather than discovered (let alone received) was considered a weak form of knowledge, if considered knowledge at all. His proposal was that the individual process of sifting through perceptions, whether consciously or unconsciously, uses a particular intellectual lens and is consequently the actual process of creating ideas. Yet to many of his contemporaries, this proposal was considered weak and such knowledge untrustworthy or merely subjective. For a man to consider subjective experiences as part of the content of knowledge may have been excusable as a simple intermittent thought error; however, when women were admitted into philosophy doctorate programs at the University of Chicago, one of the few programs outside of Radcliffe, and those women flocked toward Dewey's tutelage, the respect for Dewey's theories of subjective knowledge diminished even more, moving instead toward the more extreme forms of analytic philosophy, in which knowledge could be reduced to the most calculated form of symbolic logic. Women and their subjective forms of knowledge were subsequently shunted off to the new academic disciplinary field of social work, since the women's focus was considered evidence of an inability to acquire real knowledge. Only objective knowledge was valued, and since the new academic fields in the hard sciences produced objective knowledge, these disciplines superseded philosophy as generators of practical knowledge. Yet feminist rage hath duty sworn: most knowledge is contextual and subjective.

### III

Unfortunately, feminists, both in Women's Studies and elsewhere, who advocate for contextualized, rather than specialized, knowledge have been assailed by criticism that such knowledge lacks content. Nonetheless, the feminist notion that most knowledge is interdisciplinary remains unchanged. Although the feminist focus on interdisciplinary sources of knowledge and the method of knowledge acquisition can be difficult to articulate and have been devalued in the academic community, feminist teaching, research, and activism prevail in their role as a critique of traditional knowledge. Unfortunately, mainstream academics consider a critique of theoretical content to be only a strategic technique, mere pedagogy without content. It has therefore been difficult to establish Women's Studies as a department, rather than a program or unit within a school.

Feminist critique focuses on the method of knowledge acquisition, and is therefore the content of feminist knowledge. Method as action determines what counts as evidence of knowledge, as well as who gets to create and claim knowledge. Generative interdisciplinary knowledge is a vital dimension of Women's Studies teaching, research, and activism. Thus, interdisciplinary knowledge, which might be more accurately referenced as coordinated and intentional knowledge acquisition, is created, not discovered. But there is an even stronger claim to be made: even the objective knowledge of the hard and soft sciences has a contextualized nature that has yet to be faced.

Meaning is neither revealed nor discovered; we create meaning through the directed use of selectively recognized phenomena. As pragmatic feminists, things are and things work because our experiences give meaning to them—we choose these things, and we make them work by focusing on our chosen goals.<sup>1</sup> Pragmatic feminists treat the

multidimensional nature of experience as objective knowledge. A major insight of the feminist lies in understanding that when knowledge is viewed as created and not discovered the distinction between subjective and objective is minimized. When we ask whether knowledge is objective or subjective, we should know that we are asking the wrong question. The incontrovertible nature of any knowledge lies in its effectiveness within a particular context and with particular goals in mind.

Contemporary American pragmatist and philosopher John Stuhr (1987, p. 329) suggests that the source of knowledge is “experience [that] arises from . . . selective interests within a background,” and that “selective interest, the concerns or attitude of a subject . . . determines or selects the actual subject matter of reflection.” Given selective interests, knowledge emerges, determined by a “who” and a “what,” a gendered “who” and a gendered “what,” and which criteria count as evidence within particular contexts.

When we acknowledge the created nature of knowledge, how and what we teach changes. Facts (knowledge) are not always about Truth. Facts are not always independent entities. We provide ideas, and their truth is derived by circumstance and intended goal. Interdisciplinary knowledge does not emerge as if it were always already there. Experience is spontaneous, precarious, eventful, and unpredictable. Truths entail new meanings, and as such, they are forms of interdisciplinary knowledge.

Expertise in an academic field constitutes a perspective. Disciplinary perspective allows us to observe uniquely without having unique knowledge. But that is not to say that expertise does not have valuable content, and this is not to propose the dissolution of either expertise or truth. Truths are functional, not all-pervasive. And experts are



invaluable for providing certain kinds of knowledge in particular ways and in light of certain goals.

For example, in her early work on feminist methodology, Sandra Harding (1988, p. 6) proposed that each problem arising in our lives aims at a particular purpose, derives from someone or a group of someones, and exists for particular reasons. This recognition has prompted all manner of feminist teachers, researchers, and activists to ask very different questions than those asked by traditional philosophers. We ask, “Who gets to know?” and “Why does that count as evidence and not this?” and “What assumptions are you making?” These are among the variety of unsettling and probing questions that it is our job to ask.

Interdisciplinarity makes us better teachers, researchers, and activists. We are able to appeal to students who have a variety of skills; to advocate for the numerous ways students learn; to recognize the many bodies of knowledge that emerge from racialized, sexed, and classed arenas; and in so doing, we coalesce both the community and political groups. In other words, emergent knowledge is the “insider/outsider knowledge” that Bell Hooks speaks of, as well as the “situated knowledge” that Donna Haraway refers to. Interdisciplinary knowledge as generative knowledge relies on the selective interests of Lynn Hankinson Nelson’s “knowledge community,” and feminist pragmatist Charlene Seigfried’s philosophy as a lived experience, a way of being in the world. The inventive endeavor *is* the process of knowing.

In summary, Women’s Studies creates meanings in political emancipation—in ethics as a process of caring; in the politics of sexuality; in personal identity in disability studies; and in medical research as something inevitably embedded in particular cultural

values. The meaning of a thing is knowledge; we give meaning to ourselves and to our experiences. Feminists create knowledge as emergent phenomena. Interdisciplinary knowledge sustains us as both seekers and innovators in our teaching, research, and activism.

## References

- Harding, S. (Ed.). (1988). Introduction: Is there a feminist method? In *Feminism and methodology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Stuhr, J. (Ed.). (1987). *Classical American philosophy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## Notes

1. Some feminists are pragmatists. That is, some feminists adhere to the creative as a way of knowing; other feminists may consider themselves discoverers of essential or inherent femaleness.